

Sugar Kisses by fleurlb

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Language: English

Characters: Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers

Status: Completed

Published: 2016-12-16

Updated: 2016-12-16

Packaged: 2022-04-02 00:16:44

Rating: Explicit

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 1

Words: 10,458

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Five times Joyce and Hopper fake-kissed plus one time it was for real.

Sugar Kisses

Author's Note:

- For [ardentaislinn](#).

Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to write about this couple. Your Dear Yuletide Author letter incepted me - I now ship them so hard, so thanks also for that.

I hope you enjoy the story - your DYA letter was fantastic and helped me so much. I hope the gift is everything you wanted.

I own nothing here, any mistakes I made are my own, and please hand wave as necessary because the facts should never get in the way of a good story!

1. Free Milk

December 1983

The annual Hawkins Christmas party and potluck in the community center was always well attended, but this year, Hopper is seeing some faces that he hasn't seen since he was a boy. And there's no secret that everyone is here to see Will, who still looks pale and sickly, although Hopper wonders if maybe the kid always looked that way.

Hopper doesn't hover over the kid, who is already being hovered over by Joyce, but he sticks close enough to hear bits of conversation and keep his thumb on the general pulse of that corner of the party. He doesn't expect trouble, exactly, but the last few weeks have made him expect the unexpected.

He's sipping flat 7-Up and tuning out a stupid joke that Callahan is telling when he sees Dorothy Alderson, battered Bible clutched in her meaty fingers, bee-line over to Will. He claps Callahan on the shoulder and saunters over to the commotion that's already started.

“Where were you for all that time?” demands Dorothy.

Will glances at Joyce. "I was just a little lost. In the woods?"

"We saw your body, child. You're like Lazarus."

Joyce's chuckle has the edge of something hysterical in it. "That was an unfortunate case of mistaken identity."

"Like Lazarus... rising from the dead. Unless...unless he's not." Dorothy reaches out and touches Will's cheek, a kind gesture until her face twists into a horrified grimace. Joyce slaps her hand away and stands up.

"Joyce! Careful where you're standing," Hopper says, all good humor and cheer.

Her look is befuddled, but he can see she recognizes the lifeline as she peers around in a careful slow circle before looking up and throwing her arms out. "Uh, oh, mistletoe!"

Hopper steps forward, shouldering Dorothy out of the way and putting himself between her and the Byers.

"Can't mess with holiday tradition. I'm pretty sure it's bad luck," he says, smiling down at her. She stands on her tiptoes and gives him a chaste kiss on the cheek. He can feel Dorothy behind him, trying to get back to the boy. She comes around on his left, jostling him with her ample hips.

"Joyce, c'mon, I think we can do better than that! It's Christmas, after all." He reaches down and cups her face, then plants a kiss that he knows looks like a movie kiss and is about as real. But to Dorothy, it must look like foreplay, because she huffs with indignation.

"Young lady, you should know that he's never going to buy the cow if he can get the milk for free!"

Joyce giggles and Hopper pulls back. "What do you say, *young lady*? Want to get out of here?"

"You bet," says Joyce, leading the way out with Will. Hopper turns to Dorothy, who looks like a goldfish, mouth opening and closing as she splutters for words to express her outrage at their immorality.

"Merry Christmas, Dorothy. Better watch where you're standing, I'd hate to have to kiss you."

She jumps back as Hopper laughs. He catches up with Joyce halfway to the door and follows her out to her car.

"Thank you," she says to him as they stand next to the driver's side door. It's gotten colder and a few snowflakes float on a crisp breeze.

"My pleasure. It's always fun to watch a bible-thumper get her panties in a bunch. Sorry to drag you away from the party."

"We were thinking of leaving anyway. Will's getting tired." She reaches up and puts a hand on Hopper's cheek. Her hand is warm and soft, and Hopper opens his mouth to say something, but then Will coughs and Joyce jumps.

Hopper reaches around Joyce and opens her car door. "Drive safely. Let me know if you need anything."

Joyce nods as she settles into the car. He watches her drive away until her taillights are just pinpricks on the horizon.

2. Lucky

March 1984

Hopper loves The Hidden Chalet, even though it's not a chalet and it's nowhere near hidden enough, seeing as how it's plunked right on the side of Route 62, an easy stop-off for anyone going to Evansville. But it's far enough away from Hawkins and he comes here so infrequently that no one either knows or notices him. He can sit at a table in the shadow of the jukebox and watch people at the bar.

Sometimes, he makes up stories about them. Other times, he just drinks his Scotch and spaces out. But he always clocks and assesses every patron. It's a cop reflex, and it's saved his ass more than once.

He doesn't see Joyce walk into the place, but he sees her hesitate briefly by the bar, looking like someone who can't decide whether to make a bad decision or a really bad decision. She sits two stools over

from a guy Hopper has already nicknamed Yuppie-Chad because his haircut costs at least \$100 and his shoes alone would cost Hopper a couple of months' rent.

Yuppie-Chad has the decency to wait until Joyce is seated before smiling at her and motioning to the bartender that he's paying for her drink. The bar is dark, but Hopper can see that Joyce's smile is tentative, her spine still spiked with the steel of a woman who hasn't let down her guard.

Hopper settles back and watches them, reading the body language. Yuppie-Chad is relaxed, affable. He makes her laugh. She relaxes, but only so far. Hopper can see that she's still holding back and shies away a little every time Chad goes too far into her personal space. But then something changes, and she's suddenly leaning into him and laughing. Hopper is about to put on his baseball hat and slink out when Joyce gets up, trips over her purse and crashes into Yuppie-Chad, who catches her like a gallant knight.

She wobbles off to the bathroom, and Hopper can't leave until he's sure their paths won't cross. So he sinks deeper in the booth and watches the bar. Yuppie-Chad signals the bartender for another round. And when Joyce's drink arrives, he reaches into his inner blazer pocket. Hopper expects him to pull out a wallet, but his hand appears to come out empty. Hopper catches a flash of foil from between the guy's thumb and forefinger and sees his hand linger over Joyce's drink while he makes a show of mopping the side of the drink and placing it carefully on a bar mat.

"Son of a bitch," mutters Hopper under his breath. He waits for Joyce to return to the bar, and then he's across the room in four long strides.

"Honey! I am so sorry. I got held up at the quarry and just couldn't get away. You know how Mr. Slate is." His voice is too loud, intended to draw some attention. When he gets to Joyce, he muscles in and kisses her, aiming for her cheek but purposely missing.

"Trust me. Let's go," he whispers into her ear, barely louder than a breath.

"Robert, it was nice to meet you, but I've got to run," says Joyce, her tone light as Hopper throws a few bills on the bar to cover their drinks. He takes her hand and pulls her up, grabbing her purse as they go.

"We're going to be late for the thing," he says before dragging her away. They crash out the door, and he race-walks them to her car while he roots in her purse for her keys. He opens her door and holds it for her as she gets in. A low fog has rolled in since he arrived in the bar. He can see lit cigarettes in at least three cars, and no one has left the bar since they got to the car.

He gets in the car and puts the keys in the ignition, then sits back and smiles at Joyce. She returns the smile uncertainly, and he can see a sliver of fear in her eyes, but no panic. He reaches out and pushes a lock of hair behind her ear, then leans in to kiss her chin. He plants small kisses along her jaw bone, whispering words in between each kiss.

"You haven't... asked me what's going on.... so I'm guessing you know.... something's wrong."

Her nod is barely perceptible, but he feels it. He pulls her into a hug. "Don't talk about anything yet. Pretend you're really in to me. I know somewhere we can go."

"You probably want to get rid of this," she breathes into his ear, as she stashes a small square into his pocket before she breaks the embrace. He can feel that it's a wallet, and he smiles and lets out a low whistle.

He drives long enough to know the they have at least three tails, and it's also long enough for him to know that they're not from around here. When he's ready, it takes six sharp turns, four alleys, three parking lots, and one deserted car wash to lose them. Then he doubles-back and hides the car behind a billboard in Boonville that he knows the locals must use for a speed trap because of the excellent sightline to the road.

He turns off the engine and slides down into the seat. He looks over at Joyce, whose expression is unreadable in the gloom of their hiding

spot.

“You okay?” he asks, keeping his eyes on the road.

“I think so. I don't understand what happened exactly.”

Hopper's deep, genuine chuckle surprises him, but Joyce's understatement sums up the last six months as well as the current moment. Pretty soon, she's laughing quietly into her hands, and Hopper feels more normal and happy than he has in ages.

“There they go,” he says, watching as five plain dark sedans roll past, their pace just brisk enough to rattle the long antennas that sprout from the back of each car. Three cigarettes in the parking lot, plus the guy at the bar, plus a non-smoker... or maybe his eyes aren't quite as sharp as they used to be.

“Who are they and where are they going?” asks Joyce, peering over the dashboard to get a better look at their former pursuers.

Hopper lights a cigarette, inhales deeply, then breaths out before answering. “I don't know.”

He hands the cigarette to Joyce, lights another one, and opens the window to let some of the smoke out. As the nicotine hits his head, he starts to think more clearly. He remembers the wallet and pulls it out of his pocket along with a small flashlight.

“Let's have a look.” The wallet is small and light, made of nondescript plastic-leather. Hopper peeks in the cash section, which at a glance seems to have a little over \$30, no bill bigger than a ten. No pictures, the wallet doesn't even have a plastic accordion for them. The slots have three different gas station credit cards and a Department of Energy employee ID for a man named John Tolliver, whose smudgy photo might match Yuppie-Chad.

He hands the wallet and the light over to Joyce, who does her own cursory investigation before giving the items back. “He's with the government?”

“Seems sloppy to leave that in there. Seems extra sloppy to let you lift it. Maybe they want us to know they're on to you. But that still

doesn't tell us who they are exactly.”

Joyce laughs and bumps into Hopper. “It's always going to be something, Hop, isn't it?”

He shakes his head and flicks his burnt-out cigarette out of the window. He reaches into his pocket to get his pack and lighter, but he can only find the pack. He checks his other pocket, then looks around on his lap, thinking that he dropped it.

Joyce gives a three-tone whistle to get his attention, and he looks over at her. She's holding his lighter, and her smile is bright.

“All right. Maybe you lifting the wallet wasn't part of their plan. And I don't want to know where you learned that trick or whether you ever use it for anything other than self-defense.” He puts a cigarette between his lips and reaches for the lighter, but Joyce waves him off. She lights it for him, then takes a one out of the pack and lights it for herself before dropping the lighter in his front shirt pocket. He puts his cigarettes there too, just to keep them together.

“So tell me what you were doing tonight? Did you know this guy? Have plans to meet him?”

Joyce shakes her head. “I had to go to the JC Penney's in Evansville to get Will some new jeans. He's grown four inches since January. I didn't plan on stopping at the bar. I don't know why I did, really, except that...and I know how this sounds.... but I just couldn't face going home right away.”

Hopper tries to catch her eye, but she turns away to look out the window. “Joyce?”

“I'm worried about Will. Ever since he's come back, he's different.” She presses her forehead into the window.

“Different how?”

“I don't know. Different. Not right. Not himself.”

“Joyce, what he went through, what you all went through, it was like something out of a horror movie. Shit like that, it's going to mess

anyone up.”

“Did it mess you up, Hop?” She looks at him and he looks back, and he feels like she's looking right into his soul. Like he's being seen, really and truly seen, for the first time.

He can only nod at first. He doesn't trust his voice. But he can see her muscles unwinding as some of the tension leaves her body.

“It's been a couple of months. I thought we were supposed to be completely back to normal by now,” she says with a sad smile.

Hopper returns the smile. “I don't even know what normal is anymore. Maybe we need to find a new normal. But that's going to take time and right now, we need to focus on the more urgent problem.”

“Whoever that guy....those guys....are.”

“What bothers me is, that guy was already sitting at the bar before you came in. So did they have someone in a couple of different places, or were they just hoping to get lucky at that bar?”

“Doesn't everyone hope to get lucky in a bar? Isn't that why you were there?” jokes Joyce.

Hopper doesn't get distracted by the joke. “So something spooked you, made you lift his wallet.”

“He said something like 'and how's your boy doing?' And I hadn't said anything about my boys. Wasn't going to say anything about them.”

Hopper nods. It's an innocent enough line. At least one television camera from Indianapolis had made its way down to Hawkins after Will's disappearance. They hadn't stuck around. But still, someone might plausibly have seen Joyce and Will on television and remembered. The line wasn't exactly sloppy, but it wasn't smooth either. And it might have worked, if every fiber in Joyce's body wasn't still on high-alert.

“Why'd you hustle me out of there?” Joyce turns to rest her back against the door, settling in to watch him.

"The guy put something in your drink when you went to the restroom." Hopper flicks ash out the window, tries not to let his anger show. Because it's seeping in now, rising like flood waters, the idea that asshole might have wanted to hurt her.

"Son of a bitch," mutters Joyce. She inhales deeply from her nearly-gone cigarette, and Hopper catches the hint of a tremble in her hand. He wants to reach out to her, but doesn't.

"What were you doing there anyway? Little far away from home," Joyce says after several quiet minutes.

He shrugs a shoulder. "Guess that's what I like about it. I go in there sometimes, not enough to be noticed, just to watch people. Be alone but not alone, you know?"

"Yeah... guess it's lucky for me, you being in the right place at the right time."

"There you go. We went to a bar and got lucky," he grins as he starts up the car, part of him enjoying the joke but the larger part of him, the cop part of him, planning their route home and trying to unravel the mystery of who those guys are, what they want, and whether they're every going to leave Joyce alone.

3. Sting *July 1984*

The sting was set up by an army buddy who is now a district attorney in Louisville. His secretary's kid has bone cancer, and a charlatan cornered her when she was leaving the oncologist's office. Just picturing it makes Hopper's blood boil, but he's keeping his feelings on a tight leash, because the sting is going to nail this bastard to the wall.

His buddy recruited him to play the father of a patient, who will be played by the secretary's son. Hopper lined up Mary, a deputy over in Jasper, to play the mother because she's a natural with kids and knows how to handle evidence. It was all set. Mary had three phone

consultations with the asshole, and the meeting in his office was scheduled with the instructions to bring a cashier's check for \$10,000, which was enough to pay for a new truck with all the bells and whistles plus a nice little vacation.

And then Mary had to go and get the measles, so there was no way she could be within 1000 feet of the kid. And there was no way they could trick the charlatan without the kid.

But Hopper wasn't about to throw in the towel and let the slimy bastard slither off into the shadows. Not when he knows someone who is a natural with kids and has shown she can think on her feet and improvise.

Which is how he finds himself waiting for Joyce in a shabby strip mall in Louisville, standing in the back office of a low-rent lawyer, who happens to have the premises right next to the charlatan and who was fine "sub-letting" said premises for a week for a hefty sum, no questions asked. Hopper is wearing a casual suburban Dad shirt and feels naked in his chino trousers, because casual suburban Dads don't usually carry handguns to their kid's doctor appointments.

He and his army buddy have tried to make small talk, but they quickly abandon words for silence. The door opens, and he watches Joyce walk in, but he only knows it's Joyce because he walked into the office with her an hour ago. The woman standing in front of him wears a tailored blouse with a fluffy bow at the neck and high-waisted dress slacks. Her hair is a shellacked halo, every curl blow-dried and hair-sprayed into perfect submission.

"Well?" she asks tentatively.

"You look like you stepped out of a Macy's catalog. I barely recognize you." She looks like a million bucks, but she doesn't look like Joyce anymore, and the dissonance pokes him in the gut. He realizes he prefers her to look like herself, all flyaway hair and frayed flannel.

"That's because I'm Mary, just like we practiced, Jim," she replies, her tone prim and measured. She looks up at him, quirks up the corner of her mouth, sends him a sly wink. It's a momentary flash of Joyce that settles and focuses him.

"So you're both clear on the plan?" asks his army buddy.

"The transmitter is concealed in my purse. Jim has the check. We try to draw out as much information and as many promises as possible. After we get the guy to guarantee a cure for the money, I excuse myself and the kid to use the bathroom. Then you guys will bust in and shut the S.O.B. down," says Mary. Because that's who she is now and Hopper needs to hold onto that so he doesn't blow this thing.

"Any questions?" asks his buddy.

"Isn't he going to realize my voice is different?" she asks.

"You don't sound all that different from Mary," says Hopper. "If he questions it, we can chalk it up to the phone lines. Just laugh and tell him that everyone always says that you sound different on the phone."

"And what about the boy? Has he ever seen the boy before?"

His buddy shakes his head. "No, he's only ever met my secretary. She couldn't, for understandable reasons, do this. But she and her husband have given permission for their son to help out."

Hopper is impressed by the questions that she's asked and also relieved that she only had two. He's ready to get this whole thing over with. They discretely make their way to the parking lot to meet Nicky, who is waiting in his mom's car. Hopper spots him from twenty feet away. The kid is bald and skinny and pale. He has a capped IV-line in his hand and a port by his collarbone. Hopper feels the world lurch sideways, and he slows his pace by half a step.

Joyce slips her hand into his and gives it a squeeze, then brushes past him and stops in front of him. "I can handle this part, Hop. Just turn around, and you can lead the way when we're ready."

"You can't call me that, Mary," he says, trying for a teasing tone but a cracking voice betrays him.

She physically turns him around, and he rests against the passenger door of a sedan, elbows on the roof while he looks directly into the sun to blur his vision. He can hear her meeting with Nicky, the soft

commotion of getting the sick child out of the car, and he's relieved that she's taken over.

Too soon, a gentle push on his lower back lets him know that it's time to get the show on the road. He takes a deep breath to steady himself and looks down at the blue ribbon on his wrist. He stands up straight and leads the way, right into the charlatan's office, where they are mercifully ushered into a consultation room.

Two uncomfortable-looking chairs are arranged in front of a stylish glass desk, while an exam table lurks along the far wall. Jim walks past the chairs and leans the bulk of his weight on the edge of the table, angling himself toward the seat behind the desk.

Mary puts her purse on the desk then settles into the chair nearest to the exam table, but angles it so that her body shields Nicky, who is sitting in her lap, from Hopper's view. She talks quietly to the boy and is rewarded with giggles while Hopper keeps his eyes on the door.

The scumbag keeps them waiting for over 20 minutes, and Hopper can feel a rubber band stretching in his chest as he tries not to remember every little room like this where he waited with dwindling hope and surging dread.

When the door opens, Hopper is ready to punch the Bee-Gees mustache off the guy's face before he even opens his mouth. But somehow, he manages to fold his arms and watch as Mary answers the guy's questions about the kid's medical history. The guy comes around and stands in front of her while he does a cursory examination of the kid.

"Mr. and Mrs. Sylvester, after reviewing the medical record and examining your son, I am pleased to report that he seems to be an excellent candidate to receive my holistic treatment, which has an 83% success rate in treating aggressive cancers."

"I know you explained it on the phone, but I'm not really good at remembering things these days," says Mary with a self-deprecating little laugh. "What is the treatment, exactly?"

"We like to think of the treatment as a three-pronged attack on the cancer," says the charlatan as he walks around and sits down behind his desk.

"The first prong is a juice cleanse, with a caloric restriction, which both cleans out toxins and helps starve the cancer. The second prong is a probiotic mineral supplement, which beefs up the immune system. And the third prong is very gentle low-voltage disruption at the site of any tumor activity, which reverses the polarity of the cancer cells and causes them to shrink."

"Whoa, hold on a minute. I'm hearing starving and voltage. What are the side-effects of this treatment?" asks Hopper, just about managing not to spit the word treatment. Part of his brain thinks he probably should have kept his big mouth shut, but his reptile brain has taken over. He's just reacting now, acting like he would have if he had met this guy when he and Diane were desperately searching for second and third and fourth opinions.

"It's a holistic, homeopathic, and exceptionally gentle treatment. Chemo has side-effects. Radiation has side-effects. This treatment is a walk in the park compared to what your son has already been through." The guy's tone is unctuous and oily, and it's calling out to Hopper's punching fists. He jams his hands in his pockets and focuses on breathing.

"How soon will Nicky get better?" asks Mary.

"I am hopeful that you'd begin to see some positive results nearly immediately." The charlatan drones on more about clinical trials and extended results, but the words fade to a distant buzzing in Hopper's ear. He doesn't understand what's happening, but he feels like he's being gut punched by every feeling he's bottled up since Sarah got sick. Like he's being kicked in the nuts by every agonizing decision that he and Diane made. He hates it, hates himself, but he knows he can't stay in the room for another minute,

"I'm sorry. I don't think I can do this," he says, his voice husky with grief.

"But Nicky wants to fight. We need to help him. We need this,

Jimmy. Please."

"I can give you a minute to discuss this," says Dr. Smarmy, but Hopper knows that every second he stays brings him another second closer to breaking the asshole's nose.

"Mare, I'm sorry, but I can't." He bends down and kisses her forehead. He presses the cashier's check into her hand. "Do what you need to do. But I can't."

He touches the top of the boy's head lightly and then pushes past them, out into the hallway and then into the unbearable brightness of the summer day. He walks slowly to the law office and only goes inside when he's sure no one is watching him. It feels like a silly precaution after he just pulled the pin and dropped a grenade into their carefully planned sting.

He finds a small staff break room at the back of the law office and goes in, closing the door behind him. He slides down the far wall and sits on the floor, then lights a cigarette, inhaling the smoke like it's oxygen and he's a drowning man.

He hears a barrage of people moving out the door and knows that Joyce has delivered. She did the job that he wasn't able to and for that, he's grateful. But he finds it impossible to move from the floor, so he stays where he is and smokes for what feels like an eternity.

But eventually, the door swings open then clicks shut again. Joyce says nothing as she walks over and sits down next to him, close enough that their shoulders touch.

"I'm sorry. I just..." he says but his voice cracks and he can't continue.

"It's okay, we got him, Hop. It's over."

He shakes his head. "You got him. You and the kid. I'm just lucky I didn't blow it."

She puts her arm around his neck and pulls him down, dragging his head to her shoulder and wrapping her arms around him. One hand rubs his back, like he's just a kid with a skinned knee. Like he could find comfort on the floor of some shyster's office after he royally

fucked up.

But she's making this shushing sound that's nearly hypnotizing, and he feels himself relax by degrees. He doesn't realize at first that he's crying until he's sobbing. But Joyce doesn't say anything, except once, when he tries to apologize she tells him "My motto for tears and vomit is better out than in. And tears are way more manageable than vomit."

After awhile, he finds he has nothing left. Joyce presses a kiss onto the back of his head.

"You don't smell like you," he blurts out, but she just laughs.

"I don't feel like me. Mary has lousy taste in clothes. Let's get out of here." She scrambles to her feet and offers him a hand, which he waves off because she'd done more than enough for him for one day.

4. Happy

October 1984

Hopper can't remember how long he's been going over to Joyce's house on his Thursday lunch break. Since early spring maybe. The leaves are falling off the trees now and a wet chill is in the air, so it's gotta be at least six months. And he can't remember why he first stopped by except maybe he happened to be in the neighborhood.

He always parks around the back, but he still knocks and waits for Joyce to let him into the house. Sometimes, he notices something that needs to be fixed, and sometimes, she lets him fix it. But mostly, they just hang out in the kitchen, shooting the shit, until he has to get back to the station and she has to get ready for work.

Joyce is sitting on the kitchen counter, laughing at his story of how Wilson nearly burnt down someone's house trying to catch a rogue chipmunk when they hear the front door give its customary groan. Hopper offered to oil it weeks ago, but Joyce said it was a poor woman's burglar alarm.

Hopper is out of his seat in seconds, one hand on his holstered gun,

the other hand motioning for Joyce to stay where she is. Her eyes are wide and he can see that she wants to speak but has the good sense not to.

“Joyce? Hello?” comes a familiar but unwelcome voice.

“Lonnie,” breathes Joyce, exasperation in her tone. “All these years and he still hasn't figured out that he doesn't live here anymore.”

“Were you expecting him?” asks Hopper, but she's shaking her head before he can even finish the question.

“There you are. And you have company. That's okay, I also brought some company too,” says Lonnie as he rounds the corner into the kitchen. His smile has a mean edge, and he has his arm around a much younger, and massively pregnant, woman.

“Lonnie, you don't live here anymore. You can't just walk in,” says Joyce from her perch on the counter.

“We wanted to see the boys, tell them they're going to get a new baby brother or sister as a Christmas present this year.” Lonnie beams as he rubs his girlfriend's belly, and Hopper feels like he might throw up in his mouth. He looks over at Joyce and can see the fire in her dark eyes.

“That would be the first Christmas present they've gotten from you since you left them,” says Joyce.

“If you wanted to see the boys, you should've come on an evening or weekend, you know, when they're not in school. They're not here, so you can't be here either. Time for you to go,” says Hopper, as he leans back against the fridge and crosses his arms.

“Oh, really? Is that how things are now? You're calling the shots around here?”

“Lonnie, I want you to leave too. No one wants you here. The boys don't want to see you either,” says Joyce.

Lonnie's laugh is short and bitter. But he decides to turn it toward Hopper. “Fine, man, we're going. Have fun with my sloppy seconds.”

Joyce is off the counter and at Hopper's side in one fluid motion, which is good, because his hands are starting to feel punchy. He looks down at Joyce, and she gives him a sly half-smile. He puts a gentle hand on her cheek and bends down to kiss her, a kiss that feels dangerous as the world falls away from him and the only thing he can focus on is how soft her mouth is.

But he knows it doesn't mean anything, that they're just doing it to piss Lonnie off. Which is fine. Because he was three seconds away from punching the asshole, which would create paperwork and hassle. And this kiss is way more fun than paperwork. Joyce's hands are on his chest, and he can feel his heart starting to beat faster as he wills his body not to respond to her too much.

The front door slams, and he breaks off the kiss.

Joyce steps around him to open the fridge and pull out two beers. She hands him one and sinks into a chair at the kitchen table. He sits down across from her and opens his beer while he watches Joyce drain about half of hers.

"You okay?" he asks.

She shrugs. "I don't know. I'm pissed off. At the nerve of him, just walking in here with her."

Hopper nods and takes a pull from his beer. Joyce is fumbling with her cigarettes, agitation and anger making her clumsy. He reaches over and takes them from her, lights one, and gives it to her, then pulls out his own pack and lights one.

They smoke in silence for awhile.

"I don't know what bothers me more. That he might start a family with her and leave and just repeat the cycle. Or that he might stay and get a happily-ever-after ending that he definitely doesn't deserve," says Joyce, stubbing out her cigarette with more force than is usually required to do the job.

He exhales slowly. "Were you ever happy with him?"

"I was....obsessed....infatuated....ensorcelled." Joyce wraps her arms

around herself.

“Ensorcelled?” laughs Hopper. “That’s a hell of a word.”

She grins. “I’ve been helping Jonathan study for the SAT.”

“I never took the SAT, so I can’t say exactly what that word means, but it doesn’t sound like you were ever happy with Lonnie.”

“No. The boys, they’ve made me happy. They’ve also made me tear my hair out, but they’re the only good things to come out that marriage.”

Hopper lights another cigarette. “Happy is good. But it can’t protect you from the world.”

“What can protect you from the world?” Joyce’s tone suggests that she already knows the answer.

“Nothing. Not a goddamn thing. Christ, when did we get so.... you have an SAT word for how we are?”

Joyce laughs. “There’s not one word for us.”

“I suppose there’s not,” he replies. “I suppose there’s not.”

Joyce looks out the window, and he follows her gaze. The trees are spindly and sad-looking without their leaves. The shed has started to lean inexorably to the left, and the swing set is probably more rust than metal. Joyce sighs and when she finally speaks, her words start out slow, like they’re feeling their way out of a dark room, but then they speed up and tumble out nearly on top of each other.

“I just...I regret so much. Lonnie was a....a class A mistake, and if it was just me that he hurt, that would be fine. I deserved some of it. But the boys. The way they’ve had to grow up because of him, because of decisions that I made. That kills me. Jonathan has paid more into this household than Lonnie ever did, and he shouldn’t have to do that. That’s not his job. He’s just a kid.”

Hopper slams a flat palm on the table, and the sound is more harsh than he intended, but it does the job of startling her out of whatever

dark place she's in.

"Jesus, Hop," she says, nervously taking a drag from her cigarette.

"Sorry, but it's important that you hear this. Do not let the regrets and guilt in. Don't do it. They're dry rot. They're little moles that dig up under your house and before you know it, the foundation is subsiding. Your boys are everything to you, and they know it. What you do for them, they notice, and they know exactly what they mean to you. You hold on to what's good, while you have it."

Her smile is sad and sweet and she's blinking away tears. "I will. I try."

"I know you struggle. But the important thing is that you keep showing up. Don't let all this bullshit drag you under. Keep putting one foot in front of the other, keep helping Jonathan with SAT words, keep listening to Will's demon dragon stories."

"Dungeons and Dragons," Joyce corrects with a wry grin.

"Whatever." He looks straight into her eyes, and his voice is serious. "You're the toughest person I know, tougher than I'll ever be."

"That's not true," she says, waving his words away and blowing air out of her lips like he was some guy spinning lines at a bar.

"It is. And I'm not going to fight with you about it. That'd be like fighting over whether the sky is blue." Hopper stands up and puts his hat on, then straightens the brim.

"You heading out?"

"Yeah, those donuts, you know, they're not going to eat themselves." He pauses next to her chair and puts a light hand on her shoulder. "You okay?"

She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. "Yeah, I am now. Thank you."

"I didn't do anything. Didn't even throw a punch," he says as he walks out.

5. Pistol

November 1984

By the time Joyce tells him about the threatening letters, she has a manila envelope stuffed full of them. She's arranged them in chronological order and written the date she received them on the bottom left corner of each one.

"You should have told me after the first one." He runs a hand through his hair and tries to think.

"But the first one was so vague. 'We know what he is.' That could just be kids having an asshole laugh."

"Joyce, if you really thought it was a mean middle-school prank, you wouldn't have saved and dated all the letters." He pages through them, vague threats spelled out in haphazard letters cut out of magazines. Nothing to trace, no point in looking for fingerprints, no real way to assess the threat.

She deflates and sinks back into the couch. "I thought I could handle it, and I didn't think there would be much to handle. I called you as soon as that changed."

Hopper pulls out the last letter, with its jangly brightly colored letters that spell out the message "The new year starts with a clean slate. Say your goodbyes."

Hopper sighs. "Okay, I'm going to figure out somewhere for the boys to go over the Christmas break. They'll be safe and we can wait and deal with this problem, if it arrives. In the meantime, you need to learn how to shoot."

"Okay. I've got some cans. We can go in the woods."

"No, not here. We practice shooting here and someone calls in a noise or shots fired complaint, then suddenly I'm up to my ears in paperwork and awkward explanations. We'll go to the firing range over in Patoka."

“That's an hour from here!”

“Well, in case whoever is threatening you is local, probably best not to tip your hand, you know. Does going now work for you?”

She looks at the clock and nods. “Yeah, I have to pick Will up from the Wheelers at five o'clock. Can you teach me everything I need to know in less than two hours?”

“Sounds like a challenge, but yeah, let's try.”

They take separate cars to the firing range, and Hopper arrives first. The parking lot is empty except for one other car. He leans against his truck and smokes while he waits, then meets Joyce at her car when she arrives.

“Did you speed all the way here?” she asks as she gets out of the car.

He shrugs a shoulder and tosses his cigarette butt across the parking lot. “Perk of the job. One of the few, let me tell you.”

Hopper shoulders the duffel bag of guns and bullets and they walk into the shooting range. A red-headed old-timer named Murphy is working the front counter.

“Afternoon, Hopper, ma'am. What can I do for you and the little lady?”

Joyce shoots Hopper a dagger of a look.

“Just here to teach her how to shoot. Need some targets,” says Hopper.

“You want to borrow something small for her?” asks Murphy. “I can't imagine her learning on your .357.”

“Thanks, Murph, but I have a .22.” Hopper gestures to the bag.

“I don't know, honey, will that be small enough for my tiny lady hands?” asks Joyce, placing her hand right on top of his.

“I'm sure it'll be just fine,” he replies, suspicious of her wide eyes and

sudden use of a pet name. It dawns on him that she's annoyed by Murphy and is messing with him because of it.

"Well, pookie bear, if you say so, I don't know anything about guns," says Joyce with a vacuous laugh.

Hopper feels his face starting to burn. He looks up at Murphy, who is smirking at him.

"Murph? The targets?" reminds Hopper, sending a warning look to Joyce, who is enjoying his discomfort too much.

Murphy drops a stack of targets onto the counter, and Hopper hands him a ten dollar bill.

"It's good to teach ladies how to shoot. Just don't teach her too well, if you know what I mean. Could come back to bite you in the future, if you step out of line." Murphy laughs heartily, and Hopper hopes his grimace can pass for smile.

They open the heavy soundproof door into the huge space that serves as the range. They walk over into one of the cubicles, and Hopper drops the duffel bag onto the counter. He presses a button to move the target holder to them, clips a human form target onto it, then sends it to the middle of the alley.

He pulls out his .22 and shows Joyce how to load it and take off the safety, then he empties it and has her load it.

"Okay, here's how you hold it. First of all, always figure that it's loaded. Always. Second, wrap your right hand around the grip, keep your trigger finger stretched out along here until you're ready to use it. Then you'll use your other hand for support. Think of a cup and a saucer." He demonstrates each step as he talks. He finds it hard to explain, since holding a gun is as natural to him now as breathing.

"It's tiny. How much damage can it really do?" asks Joyce skeptically.

"Enough. Especially if you aim it right," he says, holding the gun out to her.

"Against that....thing?" she asks as she takes the gun, frowning at its

lightness.

“Just about any gun, except maybe a 50-caliber machine gun, is going to be a peashooter to that thing. But I seriously doubt that thing is carefully clipping letters out of Ladies Home Journal to scare you.”

Joyce shivers and Hopper turns her around so that she's facing the target. “Keep your body a little sideways, so you're not a big target. Then raise the gun and line up the sight and the end of the barrel with whatever you're aiming at. Center of the chest is probably easiest. Then take a deep breath, keep still, and pull the trigger gently, keep the pressure constant, don't jerk it around.”

He stands back and watches Joyce aim the gun and then pull the trigger. The shot is loud in the quiet room, and she squeals and jumps back, startled.

“I don't like this, Hop,” she says as she tries to hand the gun back to him.

He holds his hands up and refuses to take it. “You did fine. You just need to practice.”

She shakes her head. “No, I really don't like it.”

“Joyce, it's like beer. No one likes beer at first, but we all get used to it.” He pulls a half-empty box of .22 bullets out of his bag and drops it on the counter. “We can be done when you've finished that box.”

“That's going to take forever,” she complains.

“Then you best get started,” he says with a grin. He hangs out by the back wall and watches her work, helping from time to time to change the targets and put them at varying distances. She's not the worst shot he's ever seen, in fact, she could probably give Callahan a run for his money. When the box is empty, they step back out to the front room.

“It's a long way home. I'm just going to visit the little girls' room real quick,” she says, abandoning him with a leering Murphy.

Hopper manages to make small talk about the new Ruger that's due out in the next year.

"Y'all have fun tonight. I find that teaching a lady how to shoot, wakes up something inside of her. And I bet that one is a real pistol in bed," says Murphy.

"Yeah, you betcha," mumbles Hopper as he looks up to find Joyce leaving the ladies' room. He can tell from the way her eyes narrow that he should've made the Ruger conversation last longer.

"C'mon shnookems, I can't wait to get home," says Joyce, and Murphy snorts an "I told ya so" at Hopper, who is pretty sure he will never be able to come back to this firing range.

"What's with all the pookie bear and shnookems stuff?" he asks when they're halfway to her car.

"Just trying to give that retrograde Neanderthal something to keep him warm at night," replies Joyce, rolling her eyes.

When they get to the car, he looks back and sees Murphy loitering by the door, turning the sign from Open to Closed. He can tell by the evil glint in Joyce's eye that she's clocked him too. She grabs Hopper's belt buckle and pulls him close.

"What are you doing?" he hisses.

"You know us little ladies, all that cordite and gun smoke go right to our empty little heads," says Joyce before she plants a theatrical kiss right on his lips.

"You know I'm never going to be able to come back here again," says Hopper, as he opens the door of her car.

"I'm counting on it," she says with a wink. He playfully pushes her down into the car.

"Careful, Hop, I might lose control," she says.

"Yeah, yeah, is that a threat or a promise?" He shuts the door before she can answer and walks away, throwing a little wave over his

shoulder. When she drives past, she flips him the bird, and he laughs.

+ 1. Something

January 2, 1985

Hopper convinces Joyce to send the boys to his brother's place on the edge of the Everglades. She reluctantly agrees, and only after he promises that he'd trust his brother with his own child. Transportation is another issue, but as soon as Jonathan is told, he insists on driving. Hopper lets him borrow a car so that his car is still parked in front of the house.

Joyce's house is remote enough that it's difficult for anyone to watch it without being watched themselves. So Hopper is fairly satisfied that the attack, if there is one, will come without much in the way of warning. They wait all New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, but nothing happens. A soft snow falls around the house, which makes it even easier to monitor whether someone is sneaking up on them. But the snow's been the most exciting thing.

They're getting bored and a little stir-crazy on the third night of their vigil. It's close to midnight, and they've spent the evening playing poker. Joyce is finally getting good enough to make the games interesting. But there's only so much poker that he can take, so eventually, he turns on the stereo, which is playing some tape that Jonathan made, and they sit on opposite ends of the couch, smoking and drinking.

"This music isn't terrible. Jonathan put it together, huh?"

"Yeah. He's really into music. Always finding these obscure bands and then hassling me to listen to them. He's so passionate about it."

When Joyce talks about her boys, her face becomes animated and her voice changes, which twists something bittersweet and alive deep in Hopper that he doesn't know how to deal with. So he has another shot of Scotch and lights another cigarette.

"Well, I didn't like that last one, all that screaming about taking one

for heartaches and headaches and everything, but the rest of it's been okay."

"Can I tell you something?" she asks, a giggle at the edge of her voice.

"You know you can," he replies, settling into his corner of the couch and stretching his arm along the top. She turns toward him and folds one leg up underneath her, nestling into the side of the couch.

"I think Jonathan has something going on with Nancy and that Harrington boy.....the one he hit."

"What, you mean like a love-triangle kind of thing? That's not exactly news," says Hopper, blowing smoke up to the ceiling.

"No, not like a love-triangle kind of thing. More like a.....romantic entanglement with both of them, you know, maybe like a threesome kind of thing."

"You know that would sound way more impressive if it were two girls."

"Hopper!" She reaches over to give him a playful punch in the arm. When she settles back on the couch, she's a lot closer to him than she used to be. "Have you ever....you know....had a threesome?"

He laughs and shakes his head. "Me? I'm lucky if I can get one woman into bed. Two? That's way outta my league."

"That's not what I've heard. Or remember from back in the day. You had your pick."

He manages not to point out that his pick picked someone else. "Back in the day? We were a little more straight-laced back in the day. I don't even know if the word threesome was in the dictionary back then."

"You're talking like we grew up in the Dark Ages. You were the right age for the Summer of Love."

"Army. Not much love there. How about you?"

She smiles. "Hopper, a lady never tells."

It's on the tip of his tongue to say that they both know she's not a lady, but he swallows it with a slug of Scotch and just raises his eyebrows instead. A year ago, he would've said it, knowing it would hurt her feelings. Now though? Now, it feels better not to say it.

The song on the stereo changes to something that has soft chords, a quiet slow beat, and a wistful guitar singing out like a bird. Joyce springs off the couch.

"I love this song. C'mon, Hop, dance with me."

He makes a half-hearted protest, but Joyce is standing there, swaying her hips and holding out a hand to him. He takes her it, and she pulls him off the couch. He puts a hand on the small of her back and holds her other hand up to his heart. She leans into him, and they sway while the words and music drift around them.

If you twist and turn away
If you tear yourself in two again
If I could, yes I would
If I could, I would
Let it go
Surrender
Dislocate

If I could throw this lifeless lifeline to the wind
Leave this heart of clay
See you walk, walk away
Into the night
And through the rain
Into the half-light
And through the flame

If I could through myself
Set your spirit free, I'd lead your heart away
See you break, break away
Into the light
And to the day

*To let it go
And so to fade away*

The song is a heap of sadness with a heart of hope in the middle, and he can see why Joyce loves it. He holds her close, shuts his eyes, and presses his lips to the top of her head, breathing in citrus and sage and smoke. He's so much taller than her, it's almost ridiculous, but they still fit together, after all these years. After she went left and he went right, and they somehow managed to end up back where they started, but changed, with memories and baggage and experiences that are different, but somehow, they understand each other better for it.

It feels dangerous, and not just because they're supposed to be alert and waiting for an ambush. He's been on his own for too long. And he isn't exactly sure what any of this means. They're friends. They have a history together. They have a history apart. It's suddenly all too much.

When the song is over, he drops her hand and steps back abruptly.

“Yeah, nice song, but you know, it's getting late, and I don't think there's any point in staying up all night. So I'm going to crash here for one more night, then I'll be out of your hair. You can call the boys tomorrow and tell them to come home.”

Joyce looks down, and he catches a fleeting look on her face, disappointment maybe, but then she shrugs and pulls herself together. She straightens up and looks at him. “Sure, yeah, that's a great idea.”

He picks up the bottle of Scotch and heads back down the long hallway to Will's room, where he's been staying on a twin bed that's way too small for him, but it makes tactical sense for him to sleep there. He closes the door, turns on a string of Christmas lights, and sits on the edge of the bed. The dance has done something to him, and a persistent tightness in his jeans tells him that it's not going away without some attention. He jams his fists in his eyes and tries to think about anything else, but the only image that sticks is Joyce and her swaying hips and sweet-smelling hair.

He stands up and pulls out the desk chair, angling it so he can see as little of the room as possible. It means he's directly facing the door, but that seems so much less skeezy than looking at the kid's room. He opens his jeans, slips out his cock and sits down, leaning back into the rickety chair. His strokes are long and sure, and his mind flips through images of Joyce, eventually landing on that kiss they had in the kitchen when Lonnie came over.

"Sorry, Hopper, the furnace is making that noise it makes just before it stops working. I brought some extra blankets," says Joyce as she swings open the door. She's addressing the bed, but quickly turns her attention around the small room.

He looks up at her. If she were a guy, he'd make a "your wife" joke, but he has to scramble for a few seconds before he's able to say dryly "You have two boys, Joyce, seems like learning to knock would be an important life skill for you."

"I am so sorry," she says, a blush rising in her cheeks, but she doesn't look away. He sees embarrassment, curiosity, and something else in her expression. And her eyes keep drifting downward.

"Hey, my eyes are up here," he says, and when she looks up at him, it's like a circuit is completed and electricity starts to flow.

"Come here," he half-whispers.

She takes a few steps, then shakes her head. "I can't...."

He's about to turn away and put himself back together when she crosses the small room and takes his hand. "I mean I can't *here*, not that I don't want to," she says as she leads him out of the room and down the hallway to her room.

He shuts the door behind them. She turns back to him, and he pulls her close and kisses her. It's like the kitchen all over again, but better, because this time, it's not just for show.

Their shirts come off quickly, landing in a pile on the floor. He's relieved to see that he doesn't have to wrestle with a bra. He looks at her for a minute, then reaches out and traces a finger along her

collarbone, down her breastbone, over to her nipple.

“At least kiss me if you're going to do that,” she says, the words breathy and light.

He picks her up and kisses her hard, carrying her over to the bed where he eases her down gently. He kisses her ear, gently nipping the top, his breath hot against her skin. His hands run over her soft skin as he kisses down her neck and along her collarbone. She giggles once when his beard tickles her, so he moves to her breasts and the giggles turn to low throaty sounds of pleasure.

He takes his time on his way down to her pants, which he pulls down and she helps kick them off. He kisses her hip bones and moves his hands lightly over her legs, kissing until his head is between her legs.

“Hop, you don't have to do that” she whispers.

He looks up at her. “Do you mean you don't want me to or I don't have to?”

“You don't- ”

He shushes her with a wicked smile and finger on her lips. “Believe me, I want to.”

She returns his smile then kisses his finger, taking it right into his mouth, and he nearly creams his pants like some goddamn teenager. He eases her open with one hand and his mouth quickly finds her clit. Her tongue licks his finger lightly, so he matches the action. When she starts to suck his finger, he does the same, matching her pressure until she's writhing underneath him.

Eventually, her hand twists in his hair and gives a sharp tug. He looks up at her.

“C'mere,” she half-whispers.

“I don't know if I'm done here yet,” he teases.

“Now and lose the pants,” she says, and he complies before returning to her, feeling her skin on his. She pulls him close and kisses him. He

doesn't know what it is about her, maybe it's their ancient history of messing around in quiet corners of the high school, but he feels like he could just kiss her forever.

She has other ideas, and soon, she's pushing on his chest, trying to flip him over. He smiles against her mouth, because it's like a mouse trying to turn over a car. But then she does this thing with her hips and in that moment, he would do anything she wanted.

Still kissing her, he rolls over, pulling her on top of him. She reaches down and wraps her hot hand around his cock, and for the second time, he thinks it's all going to be over far too soon. She gives it a hard squeeze, then rubs it against her clit and he loses all coherent thought.

She slides him inside of her as she sits up. He holds onto her hips as she moves above him, beautiful in the bit of light that's filtering in through the blinds. He closes his eyes and matches her motion until she reaches a peak, then he opens his eyes and watches her take her pleasure. He's able to hold on long enough, then a bit longer, but finally, he comes, the feeling spreading through him in hot, fierce waves.

She collapses on top of him and slides to the side, nestling in the crook of his arm, her head on his chest. He starts to say something, but she shushes him with a finger on his lips. He gives it a gentle kiss, then kisses the top of her head before sleep pulls him under.

He sleeps better than he has in longer than he can remember. When his eyes open, he looks at the blue ribbon around his wrist, then at the ceiling. It's not cracked, and the bed is different. Then he remembers and looks for Joyce.

She sitting at the foot of the bed, wearing a blue robe and holding a cup of coffee in both hands.

"How long have you been sitting there, watching me sleep?"

"Not long."

"I have to tell you, that's a little creepy," he says with a grin and she

smiles back at him.

“Come here,” he says, sitting up and patting the space next to him.

“Look, Hopper, I know that was just another Wednesday night for you, and that's fine,” she says, even though he catches something in the twist of her mouth and the tone of the word “fine” that makes him think that she's either straight-up lying or, more likely, trying to fool herself.

“Joyce, come here.”

She slides off the side of the bed, puts her coffee on the nightstand, then climbs back into bed next to him, but practically on the other side of the world.

“Right here,” he says.

She moves over to the spot next to him, but looks away. “Look, Hopper...last night...it doesn't have to mean anything.”

He puts his arm around her and tilts her chin so she's looking at him. “Joyce, it means something to me.”

“It means something to me, too.”

His heart feels lighter.

“So what does it mean?” she asks.

“I don't know exactly. I guess we're going to have to figure that out together.”

She takes his hand, entwines their fingers, then lightly kisses one of his knuckles. She looks up at him. “It that means more nights like last night, I suppose that wouldn't be too bad.”

He laughs. “Yeah, it might be a hardship, but you have to do all kinds of things in the course of an investigation.”

She leans into him, and he holds her close. He doesn't know what the next day is going to bring, but for the first time in a very long time,

he's looking forward to finding out.

/the end/

Author's Note:

Title comes from the Echo and the Bunnymen song, which wasn't released until a few years later, but the song was a total earworm as soon as I started writing, so I had to go with it.

The song in the last section is "Bad" by U2.